

021 by CherishIsTheWord

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Summary:

It's the first night since El's return that Mike and El get to spend time together, just the two of them. Mike tries to plan a fun evening at home.

After the commotion and emotional reunion that came with Eleven's return, it took a while for things to settle down. The adults had been preoccupied with sorting out the situation, and the boys were around regularly to see their friend who had come back against all odds. This night was different, however. For the first time in what seemed like forever, Mike and Eleven hung out together in his basement – just the two of them – like old times.

Mike, who had never been the same since the events of last November, was ecstatic to have El back. Soon after her return, Mike introduced El to the concept of “missing” someone.

“I missed you, El... a lot,” the boy told her the first chance he got to talk to her one-on-one.

“Missed?” she returned uncertainly.

“It means I was sad when you were gone. Really sad.”

El frowned at the thought.

“But now you're back, and everything's okay now. See?” Mike offered El a big grin and she gave a half-smile back.

“Mike?” she followed up. She had Mike's undivided attention.

“I missed you, too.”

As far as what their relationship was, well, that was a bit of a grey area at the moment. El was not just a friend and she was DEFINITELY not a sister, but with all that had happened he didn't want to bombard her with anything yet. The feelings he had developed for her over that week never dissipated and picked up right where they

left off. Despite what his family said about being too young to feel that way, Mike could only describe what he was feeling as love. In spite of everything that happened to her, before and after, she was the most caring and selfless person he ever met, and that might be what he loved about her the most.

As for where El stood on this, well, he hoped she reciprocated the feeling; clearly she liked his company, but she was not an open book. El was always learning new things and her vocabulary, too, was growing little by little, but she remained a girl of few words. Truthfully, he found that quality about her endearing, but he was at the ready if the girl ever wanted to come out of her shell and open up too.

But for tonight, he was going to set that topic aside. He wanted to introduce El to all the fun she could and should have had if there was any justice in the world. A board game, he thought. It would allow them to go at their own pace – the perfect idea for introducing El to something new and fun!

Mike agonized over the options about what he thought she might like best. For one reason or another, he couldn't come to a decision.

Clue? No, the murder scenarios are too dark a topic for El right now, he figured.

Monopoly? That takes forever and there's no way he could be ruthless to El (nor could he ever not be ruthless in Monopoly).

Scrabble? El didn't have the language to deal with that yet.

The irony was that the girl downstairs would have been happy to play pretty much anything with Mike.

Finally, Mike locked eyes on a deck of cards. If there was one thing he thought might El know a bit about, it was numbers. And there are a lot of simple games that can be played with cards...

El waited patiently on the couch knowing that Mike had something fun planned for her. Rather than the dresses or Mike's clothes, El was

now dressed comfortably in her very own “pajamas”, which she learned is a comfy kind of clothing to wear for sleeping.

It is great to hang out with all the boys, but El too was excited for this evening in particular. Spending time with just Mike was special, even if she couldn't quite articulate why. Mike had a certain patience and calmness with her unlike anybody else. And for some reason, she just liked to look at him sometimes.

Mike leaped excitedly down the stairs holding a tiny box.

“Here, El, I thought you might like to play cards,” he said, holding out the unfamiliar item.

El took it from him and inspected what was on it.

“The cards are inside,” he added.

And with that, El opened the box and was introduced to her first round of 52 pick-up. She was slightly startled, not expecting the square papers to fall all over the place. Mike, not wanting to deter the girl, frantically tried to pick the cards up. But he had a little help when about half the deck began rearrange itself on its own and neatly stack onto the table. Mike looked up to the girl who was looking at him for reassurance.

“Fun?” she offered with a hint of a smile.

Mike soon explained to El that more could be done with cards than spilling them on the floor and picking them up. There were numbers and symbols on them which meant something. Mike wanted to start off with something simple enough, but he also knew El was smart and so he didn't want to pick some baby game. Crazy Eights was his compromise.

“Why crazy?” was her first question.

“Eights are the wild cards. You can play them any time and make the suit whatever you want them to be.”

They were playing open handed a couple rounds to start. El focused intently on the hand before her. Then Mike flipped a card from the pile.

“So that’s the 5 of diamonds. That means you can play a 5 or a diamond, or an 8 if you’re stuck.”

El nodded along, starting to get a feel for the game. It was just for fun, but she also wanted to impress Mike by being a quick learner.

After a few more turns, Mike asked, “Do you want to try for real now? You keep the cards hidden and we’ll both play.”

“Yes,” said the girl matter-of-factly.

The game lasted about ten minutes. Mike was on a roll and could have ended the game a couple times, but he wanted to encourage El and kept it going. El seemed to be catching along nicely, though a couple times he politely had to correct her illegal plays. He found himself with one card remaining. With the suit of his card now being a bit obvious and El knowing as much, he ended the game there.

“Great job, El! I got lucky this time.”

“Again?” she asked, genuinely keen on the idea.

Mike, of course, was more than pleased to do that. This time, he even noticed El rearranging her hand as he had done, causing him to smile to himself. The new game ran at a torrid pace, each of them able to discard turn to turn before they were each left with one remaining. It was Mike’s turn, and finally he had nothing. He was forced to draw. It was an 8. He placed it down on the pile and changed the suit to spades, passing things off to El.

El looked at her hand and excitedly placed another 8 on top. She looked up to Mike, as if looking for confirmation that she in fact had

won. When she saw Mike nodding and smiling, she couldn't contain a big smile herself. She had learned how to play the game and had even won!

Fresh off the thrill, El had another idea up her sleeve. She saw designs on the box of cards that looked like other games. One in particular stood out and she pointed to it.

"This?"

"21?" the boy clarified.

She looked at him hopefully. Mike knew how to play; he wouldn't have thought to teach El about a game like that yet, but he couldn't say no to those doe eyes of hers.

"Okay, so this game is called 21, also known as Blackjack," he began.

"Why Blackjack?"

"Because, uh, I don't really know actually. But the goal is to beat the dealer without going over 21."

El tried to take in what Mike was saying, squinting in concentration.

Mike continued to run through the rules, ending with: "One last thing. The ace is the wildcard."

"Like the crazy eight?"

"A little. It can be either 1 or... 11."

"Yes, Mike?" El looked to Mike expectantly. He had said her name, though he usually called her just El.

"Oh, sorry. I meant the number 11," he clarified.

At this moment, Mike took pause, wondering if El would be able to comprehend this game. It did involve a bit of math, after all. She had been deprived of many words, so what made him think she learned math? But El really wanted to play, so he continued on.

“This might be a bit tough, but we can try it. Are you ready?”

“Ready.”

With that, Mike dealt a pair of cards to each of them against the dealer's ten.

“Wow, El. You got an ace and a king. That's—“

“21,” El spoke proudly.

“That's right!” Mike smiled. From that point on, El proved herself a bit of a wizard when it came to math. She may not have been taught a lot of life skills when it came to money or time. Those she would have to pick up over time, but the basic principles she seemed to pick up in short order. She was soon as sharp as the boys, if not more so.

Mike turned to his cards. A 17. He was forced to stand.

And on the dealer's hand revealed a 5, making for 15. El followed Mike's hand as he went through each step. A 7 thereafter led to a bust.

“Dealer busts.”

“You win too?”

“Well, yeah, I guess I do.”

“I like this game.” While El was always gracious whether she won or lost, she particularly liked the concept of everybody winning. Just liked she also wanted everybody to be happy and healthy in real life.

The two of them played a few more rounds before calling it quits. It was getting a little late and both were becoming quite tired. But before Mike could pack up, El wanted to tell Mike how much fun she had. Not just because of the games, but because of the quality time they got to spend together. She tried to find the words.

“Mike?”

“Yeah, El.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. I hope you had fun.”

“Yes. Again soon?”

El placed her hand on top of Mike’s, which was still resting on the table. Mike couldn’t contain his joy.

“Y-yeah, definitely,” he said back, almost stumbling over his words.

El had been back a short time, but this was when she was really back to Mike. Just like those first couple days, it was the two of them forming a strong connection with each other. El learned about the world around her and Mike learned about this special girl who came into his life. As for El, she had hoped she got the point across that she loved spending time with Mike.

If only the two knew just how much the other cared, but that they would have to save for another time soon.

Author's Note:

Happy to hear everyone's thoughts and recommendations!